

BOOK REVIEW

Jaimie Bleck and Nicholas Van de Walle. *Electoral Politics in Africa Since 1990: Continuity and Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xi + 331 pp. List of Tables. List of Figures. References. Index. \$29.99. Paper. ISBN: 9781316612477.

Jaimie Bleck and Nicolas van de Walle's *Electoral Politics in Africa* offers unique insights into the complex relationship between elections, democracy, and change (or lack thereof) in Africa. The authors claim that electoral politics in Africa since 1990 have been marked essentially by political continuity—for both good and bad. Multiparty elections are an element of continuity, “as once countries started to hold multiparty elections they continued to do so,” but the democratic gains are not yet observable in most countries, and we still find the same political class as well as pervasive clientelism.

The stasis in political life is striking, given the dramatic social and economic changes the continent has experienced in the last three decades. So “why has the move to routine and regular multiparty elections not promoted more political change in Africa? And why did it not generate democratic consolidation?” The authors argue that two main factors account for the limited impact of multiparty elections in Africa. The first is *presidentialism*, namely the presence of strong presidents with enormous influence on how electoral politics unfold. The second is the *liability of newness*, that is, the fact that almost no African countries had had significant experience of multiparty elections before the transitions in the early 1990s. Thus, moving beyond pessimistic or optimistic appraisals of the nexus between elections and democracy in Africa, the authors define elections as “brief periods” during which political change—either toward democratic progress or backsliding—is more likely to occur.

The book's interesting findings draw on hundreds of elections, survey data, newspapers, and case studies. Starting with a path dependent argument to show the surprising importance of founding multiparty elections for political dominance and to explain the very limited alternation over time, the authors then explore the multiple mechanisms used by presidents to win elections. Emphasis is given to the role of incumbency, which allows presidents to claim credit for economic progress, access state resources, and control clientelistic networks to their own advantage, and to the illiberal


mechanisms the presidents use to remain in power. The authors then move on to trace the complex roots of political continuity to the early stages of party formation and the immediate post-independence era. More specifically, Bleck and van de Walle demonstrate the vital role played by the ability of parties to recruit educated urban elites and to incorporate local brokers in rural areas to build lasting sources of support.

The remaining chapters explore the nature and dynamics of African elections, namely, the characteristics of presidential candidates, the kinds of electoral issues that dominate the campaigns, and the voting behavior of the citizens. The authors' data demonstrates that presidential candidates are almost always men, relatively old, highly educated, and urban. They rely on their incumbency advantage, but they are also able to gain support by resorting to valence characteristics, shared social identities, special brands of populism, and co-opting brokers with influence at the constituency level. As for the issues that dominate elections, Bleck and van de Walle draw on local newspapers from eight countries—Benin, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Uganda, and Zambia—over sixteen presidential election cycles. Six types of issues are coded for frequency, positions, and the actors making the statements. Economic development takes up 43 percent of all party discourse in elections cycles, followed by democracy with 31 percent. Domestic security, citizenship, sovereignty, and distribution of natural resources pool together for 26 percent.

The book's final empirical analysis is on electoral behavior; the authors produce four main findings. First, turnout has remained relatively constant since the 1990s, and participation in legislative and local elections is also good, despite the presidential character of electoral politics. Second, the context in which voters make decisions matters, and many of the variables that explain voting behavior elsewhere have salience in Africa, notably retrospective voting, partisanship, candidates' traits, and socioeconomic status. Third, voters come to the ballot through different forms of mobilization from programmatic appeals to clientelistic linkages. Fourth, urbanization, education, and the growing access to information are likely to change the dynamics of electoral politics and foster new forms of collective action. The authors conclude by arguing that elections are windows of opportunity for flux, even if the resulting change is not always positive. They highlight the positive impact of elections in the spheres of governance, citizenship, and accountability and contend that this impact is likely to increase over time as the political sphere catches up with ongoing socio-demographic changes.

This is a comprehensive and ambitious book that covers different domains of electoral politics, but this sometimes makes it difficult to identify the link between the arguments made to explain political continuity and some of the empirical analysis. It raises important questions that can shape future research: how do citizens mobilize in different types of elections? how is the internet transforming African politics? will unconventional forms of political participation become more frequent and substitute for formal political participation?

Overall, Bleck and van de Walle's book is an inspiring addition to African Studies with diverse empirical material and innovative attempts to answer key questions. The book is a must read for anyone interested in elections, democracy, campaigns, and political behavior in Africa.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Cheeseman, Nic. 2016. "Patrons, Parties, Political Linkage, and the Birth of Competitive-Authoritarianism in Africa." *African Studies Review* 59 (3): 181–200. doi:[10.1017/asr.2016.79](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2016.79).

Rabinowitz, Beth S. 2018. "More than Elections: Rural Support and Regime Stability in Africa." *African Studies Review* 61 (3): 27–52. doi:[10.1017/asr.2018.36](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.36).

Saine, Abdoulaye. 2008. "The Gambia's 2006 Presidential Election: Change or Continuity?" *African Studies Review* 51 (1): 59–83. doi:[10.1353/arw.0.0029](https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.0.0029).